

# DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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## CAPTIVE BREEDING--RACE AGAINST TIME TO SAVE THE CALIFORNIA CONDOR

A last ditch effort to save the California condor from extinction will be launched in January with an attempt to capture a few immature birds to form a captive breeding flock, Lynn A. Greenwalt, Director of the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, announced today. Young produced by the flock will eventually be returned to the wild.

Fewer than 30 of North America's largest land birds are believed to survive in mountainous areas north of Los Angeles, down by 10 in the last decade. About 100 of the condors existed in 1940.

"It may already be too late to save this species," Greenwalt said.

"But if there is any hope, it will be through captive breeding. We must try to save the condor now, before its number in the wild dips even lower and the chance for success diminishes further. There is no guarantee of success and there is a certain degree of risk. But we have no other choice."

This will be the boldest and most ambitious effort yet to save an endangered species--comparable to the successful whooping crane recovery effort which brought that species' number in the wild from 21 to more than 80 over a period of 38 years.

Captive breeding of other endangered birds including the Andean condor and whooping crane has been successfully conducted by the Service at its Patuxent Wildlife Research Center near Laurel, Maryland.

"The problem is that we don't know what's causing the condor decline," Greenwalt said. "We know that the entire population produces only about two young per year. We suspect that pesticides and other chemicals may

(more)

have affected the species' reproductive capability as they have the bald eagle, peregrine falcon and other birds. Loss of habitat to land development and contaminated food supplies may also play a role."

The problem could be even more serious, however, if tests reveal that old age and uneven sex ratios are primary causes for the condor's low reproductive rate.

Aloft, the 20-pound vulture is a spectacular sight, with a 9-foot wingspan of jet black accented with a snow-white triangle underneath. The condor soars on thermal currents for up to 100 miles, its ruby-red eyes searching the ground for mammal carcasses on which it feeds.

The first four immature birds removed from the wild, whether in January or in succeeding attempts, will be cared for by experts at a propagation facility in California where special, isolated facilities will be prepared. Known to live more than 40 years in captivity, the condor's life span in the wild may exceed 20 years. It assumes its adult appearance at about 6 years of age and begins breeding sometime later, apparently mating for life. In the wild, condors produce one egg every other year but scientists were able to increase production to 13 eggs in 11 years in a condor at the National Zoological Park in Washington, D.C., during the 1920's.

The capture will likely be carried out in the rangelands of Kern County north of Los Angeles by a team of condor experts, veterinary specialists, and wildlife researchers, backed up by a fully equipped mobile operating unit to ensure the birds' well being. The team also will trap several other condors just long enough to mark them for identification and take test samples that may help solve the riddle of why the species is unable to produce enough young to perpetuate itself.

Extraordinary precautions will be taken throughout the capture and handling process to ensure the birds' safety. If an individual is thought to be suffering undue stress, its examination will cease and the bird will be allowed to recover before processing continues, or it will be subsequently released.

The birds will be captured with nets and then will be hooded, restrained, and closely monitored for evidence of flesh color changes and increased respiration or heart beat due to stress. They will be permanently marked and fitted with tags and a tiny radio transmitter. If it can be done safely, the birds also will be examined to determine their health and sex characteristics, including taking of blood, fecal, and feather pulp samples for diagnosis.

Between now and January, endangered wildlife specialists at Patuxent and others under contract will be refining the capture, trapping, and examination techniques on "stand-in" or related species like the Andean condor and turkey vulture. Other studies will concentrate on determining the contaminant load in other wild birds that share the condor's food supply, and determining how long it would take to rid the birds' system of contaminants if they were kept on a pure food supply.

The record is good for breeding the closely related Andean condor in captivity. The Andean condor has been reared at a dozen zoos as well as Patuxent.

Patuxent started its breeding program for Andeans in 1965 as a surrogate research effort in support of the California condor. It began with nine birds of varying ages. After some trading to balance sex ratios, Patuxent had four compatible pairs, with the first eggs produced in 1971. Since then, eight healthy chicks have been raised at the Center with eight more eggs laid this spring.

The condor recovery effort of research, habitat protection, and captive breeding has broad support from the scientific community, the National Audubon Society, the California Department of Fish and Game, and several Federal agencies, many of whom will help fund the effort. First-year start-up costs are estimated at \$500,000 with costs expected to decrease in succeeding years.

The comprehensive program is based on a "contingency" plan, first proposed in 1976 by the California Condor Recovery Team, a group of experts appointed by the Fish and Wildlife Service to draft a plan to recover the bird from its precarious status. The contingency plan has since been refined, following impartial review and by a panel appointed by the National Audubon Society and the American Ornithologists Union, as well as by other experts. The plan and the panel's recommendations subsequently underwent further scrutiny by a special task force appointed by the Service Director Greenwalt, who asked the group to assess the many recommendations and determine how best to proceed with the recovery effort with the least possible risk. The resulting task force report, "Recommendations on Implementing the California Condor Contingency Plan," was approved by Greenwalt on February 23, 1979.

The Service in cooperation with the California Department of Fish and Game will oversee the recovery program, during all stages of implementation of this long-term project.

National Audubon Society will fund an additional biologist to assist with biological field work in California and soon plans to launch a major campaign to raise funds for the captive breeding effort. Interior and Audubon officials are now working out the details of a cooperative agreement on implementing the condor plan.

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Note to Editors: A special edition of the Endangered Species Technical Bulletin on the California condor is available from the Publications Unit, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Washington, D.C. 20240; telephone 343-2982. Photographs are available by calling 343-8770.